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Different Terms for Fairies in Irish Folktales

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Abstract

In Irish folktales, fairies appear quite frequently, providing an indispensable presence for the tales. The otherworld and fairies as its inhabitants are depicted in various literary works in Europe, with the idea of the otherworld and fairies considered to be greatly influenced by Celtic ideals. To investigate the aspects, and the details of the concepts in Celtic otherworld's, fairies in Irish folktales are examined in my study by the following five viewpoints: different terms for fairies, the appearance of fairies, the supernatural powers of fairies, the habitat of fairies, and plot patterns of Irish folktales involving fairies. Throughout this paper different terms for fairies are examined and explored.

Introduction

What are fairies called in Irish folktales? The answer to this question provides the most direct information in understanding what fairies are like. This paper aims to clarify one aspect of people's image of fairies in Irish folktales through investigating the use of terms referring to fairies, and their different names.

Among those who tell or hear tales of fairies, directly saying "fairies" aloud seems to be regarded as taboo. As a result, in Irish folktales, fairies are often referred to as "the Good People," or "the hill-folk," amongst other names. Concerning taboos of saying "fairies" aloud in North America and Europe, Narváez notes the following:

Because of a traditional taboo against saying "fairy" aloud, fairies on both sides of the Atlantic are often referred to with a variety of euphemisms, including "the good people," "the gentry," "the people of peace," and "them." (ix)

The reason for this taboo is "for fear of offending them,"¹ and people hope that by flattering fairies they, themselves, will be treated favourably.² Briggs¹, White, and Ó hÓgáin³ have similar ideas to Narváez and Welch. Ó Súilleabháin cites various examples for names of fairies:

They had various names in Irish, connoting The Good People, The Little People, The Noble People, The People of the Hills, The People Outside Us, and so on. (*Irish Folk Custom and Belief* 88)

Máire Mac Neill also comments on the frequency of certain names of fairies in south-west Donegal, Ireland:

The name most often used for the fairies in south-west Donegal is *bunadh na gcnoc*, literally "the people of the hills". (26)

As mentioned above, "the Good People," "the Little People," "the Noble People," and "the people of the hills" are indicated in previous studies. In this paper, we examine the terms used for fairies, the different names for them, and their frequency of occurrence, empirically, in Irish folktales. In addition to the terms and names used for fairies, including euphemistic expressions for fairies, we will also explore the complex information on how people perceive fairies including, but not limited to, their appearance.

The texts analysed are nine published collections of Irish folktales: *Folktales of Ireland* (Sean O'Sullivan, 1966), *The Folklore of Ireland* (do., 1966), *Legends from Ireland* (do., 1966), *Folktales from the Irish Countryside* (Kevin Danaher, 1967), *Fairy Legends from Donegal* (Seán Ó hEochaidh, 1977), *Stories of Sea and Shore* (John Henry, 1983), *Sean Ó Conaill's Book: Stories and Traditions from Iveragh* (Séamus Ó Duillearga, 1981), *Seanchas Annie Bhán: The Lore of Annie Bhán* (Gordon W. MacLennan, 1997), and *Children of Salmon and Other Irish Folktales* (Eileen O'Faolain, 1965). In these texts, fairies appear in 230 tales, and 346 individual fairies are found in them.

1. Different figures of fairies

Through practical examinations of terms used for fairies in Irish folktales, fairies often take the form of either human or animal figures, or other forms including voices or waves. The frequencies of the three types of figures are shown in table 1 below:

The fairies of Irish folktales take human form in 261 cases, which is an

Table 1.

		Freq.-1	Freq.-2
Human Figure	Female	101	261 (75.4%)
	Male	119	
	Child	7	
	Folk, people, etc.	34	
Animal Figure	Horse, seal, dog, hare, bird, etc.	41	41 (11.9%)
Other Figures	Voice, noise, wave, etc.	44	44 (12.7%)
Total		346	346 (100.0%)

overwhelming 75.4 percentage of all the references to fairies. Among the human forms, the male figure (119 cases) appears more frequently than the female figure (101). Generally, "fairies" may remind us of beautiful female figures, but this perception is inappropriate for fairies of Irish folktales. There are also forty-four cases where alternate forms including, voices and waves are used, which is almost equal to animal forms. It is also evident that people sometimes regard invisible things and natural phenomena as fairies. In addition to the forms that fairies take on, it is important to examine the terms and names used for fairies for each type of figure.

2. Terms or names used for human figures of fairies

Human figures can be divided into four types: female figures, male figures, figures of children (sexuality unknown), and the trooping fairies which are referred to as folk, people.

2.1. Female fairies

Fairies appearing in folktales are commonly referred to as "fairies," "the hill-folk," "the woman" or "a young girl." Through the use of these titles, a clear illustration of female figures is depicted. Following are the terms used, such as "woman" or "girl," and a depiction of their frequency of use.

- (2.1-1) "One day he was straining potatoes at the doorway, **a woman** came up to him, and he spoke to her" (O'Sullivan 1966, 171).⁵
- (2.1-2) "And the knock came to the door, and it was **a woman** she never saw before, and a call to come to help a woman in childbirth" (Danaher 15).
- (2.1-3) "**A travelling woman** came in one day to a woman of this place and asked for a drop of milk for her child" (Ó hEochaidh 159).
- (2.1-4) "A fluke of the anchor was inside the threshold of the door of a house in the Land of Youth, and **a beautiful young woman** was sitting beside the door, combing her hair over golden basin with a silver comb" (Ó Duilearga 224).
- (2.1-5) "They made great haste until they were outside Killybegs, and there **a small old woman** overtook them" (Ó hEochaidh 123).

As the five examples above show, the term "woman" is the most frequently used reference, accounting for 68.3% of all the female figures (refer to Table 2 below). In the following examples, the fairies are initially

depicted as strange women, with the use of descriptive terms including references to “girl” (19), “lady” (2) or “hag” (2) before their true identity of a fairy is realized.

(2.1-6) “One night, as he was returning from card playing as usual, he met **a red-haired girl** — as nice a girl as he had ever seen” (O’Sullivan 1966, 144).

(2.1-7) “At last we came to a bedroom with **a beautiful lady** in bed, and there he left me with her; and, bedad, it was not long till a fine bouncing boy came into the world” (O’Faolain 42).

(2.1-8) “The only difference between them was that **the old hag** had a wispy beard on her like a goat’s *meigeal*, and the daughter had not” (Danaher 79).

The word “hag” has two meanings: an ugly old woman, and an old woman with supernatural powers. In example (2.1-8), the “hag” has no supernatural powers but her appearance is described as ugly. So the “hag” is treated as an ugly old woman. These terms and their frequencies are listed below in Table 2:

As the term “woman” is the most popular reference to fairies (69 cases,

Table 2. Terms for the female fairies

Terms	Frequency
woman/ womenfolk	69 (68.3%)
girl	19 (18.8%)
queen	3 (3.0%)
lady	2 (2.0%)
mother	2 (2.0%)
hag	2 (2.0%)
wife	1 (1.0%)
sister	1 (1.0%)
widow	1 (1.0%)
daughter	1 (1.0%)
Total	101 (100.0%)

68.3%), it can be said that adult female fairies appear more frequently than child (girl) fairies. The figure of a beautiful girl is descriptive common form that is easily recognizable, but the girl’s figure is found in only nineteen cases (18.8%).

It can be clearly seen that when fairies initially appear in the female form, they are often referred to as either “woman,” or “girl.” Upon

discovering their true identity as a fairy, they are then referred to by names such as "the hill-folk." Detailed below is an examination of the names for the female fairies:

(2.1-9) "They made great haste until they were outside Killybegs, and there a **small old woman** overtook them. [. . .] They knew very well she was one of **the hill-folk**, [. . .]" (ÓhEochaidh 123).

(2.1-10) "When she was going down the slope to Dromnafinagle Bridge there was a poor travelling **woman** with a child sitting by the side of the road. [. . .] **The fairy woman** was displeased with the fairy man [. . .]" (ÓhEochaidh 147-49).

In example (2.1-9), the being which is at first referred to as "a small old woman" was found to be one of "the hill-folk." In the example (2.1-10), "a poor travelling woman" is later called "the fairy woman" without any explanation. The people, tellers and listeners, may have a tacit understanding that they are fairies, so that an explanation can be omitted.

(2.1-11) "**The fairy host** sent me out tonight to search for a musician. You'll have to come with me to the house of **the fairy woman** [...]. **About a hundred old women** were seated at a large table in the middle of the floor" (O'Sullivan 1977, 77).

On the other hand, there are the examples such as (2.1-11), in which the being is firstly referred to as "the fairy host" and "the fairy woman," then later described as "old women."

As seen above, there are many different names and words to describe the various forms and visual images of fairies. The following table (Table 3) illustrates the frequency of such terms used:

For the female fairies, they are called "fairy/fairies" or names containing "fairy" (such as "the fairy woman") in twenty-three cases. This amounts to almost half of the names used for female fairies (23/49cases: 46.9%). As mentioned in the introduction, Narváez et al. mentions that people tend to avoid calling them "fairies" directly so as not to offend them. For Irish female fairies, however, this is not always the case because they are often directly referred to as "fairies." This may indicate that the existence of female fairies in Irish folktales is not so feared by people, which will be explored in more detail in this paper.

Other names used for the reference of fairies could be described as nicknames as well as euphemistic names, indicating that these names have been influenced by people's ideals of fairies. From these names, five properties are found: 'airy' (7), 'wee' (5), 'good' (4), 'immortal' (1) as well as names indicating their habitats in hills and the sea (9). Names including 'airy' conjure up the visual imagery of a ghostly transparent

Table 3. Names of female fairies

Names	Freq.-1	Freq.-2
'fairy' "the fairies / fairy" "the fairy woman" "the fairy host" "the Duine Sighe (fairy people)"	8 9 5 1	23 (46.9%)
'airy' "the airy host" "the wee airy ones" "the spirit" "a ghost"	2 2 2 1	7 (14.3%)
'wee' "the/these wee folk" "the wee airy ones"	3 2	5 (10.2%)
'good' "The Good People" "the gentry"	2 2	4 (8.2%)
'immortal' "the immortal host"	1	1 (2.0%)
'hill-' "the hill-folk"	6	6 (12.2%)
'sea-' "the sea-host" "the mermaid" ⁶ "three daughters of the King of the Sea"	1 1 1	3 (6.1%)
Total	49	49 (100.0%)

entity. Names using "the spirit" and "ghost" are also included in the 'airy' category. In spite of their names, they have similar characteristics with that of the other fairies. In one case, (2.1-12), the "spirit" gives a snuff box to a man, which never empties.

(2.1-12) "And it was a fine snuff box, silver, it was, with grand jewels and ornaments on it. [. . .] 'And now you can keep the snuff box, and it will never be empty as long as you don't tell anyone where it came from'" (Danaher 54-55).

Such similar kinds of fairy gifts, such as inexhaustible coins and meal-chests, are also found. Furthermore, in another example, (2.1-13), the "spirit" can control sea waves and the wind. Similar powers are also found with other fairies:

(2.1-13) " 'I'll raise a gale and great seas behind your ship by devilish magic.' [. . .] The wind started to rise and to blow hard and, if it did, the widow's son began to give orders to sailor" (O'

Sullivan 1974, 111-12).

Judging from these similarities, it is apparent that these "spirits" and "ghosts" are the same entities as fairies, but they may not be called so because of associations with Christianity.

From names such as "the Good People" and "the gentry," it seems as if people consider fairies to be their good neighbours. If, as Welch states, people refer to fairies in this manner for fear of offending them, they may not actually consider the fairies to be 'good.' This cannot be proved from only their names. We will find out more evidently whether people think the fairies are good or evil in the properties of their actions.

2.2. Male fairies

Male fairies are called by names such as "the wee folk," and also referred to as "the man" or "a young boy." Terms which refer to male fairies will be examined first:

(2.2-1) "As they were walking down the hillside towards Carrowcannon, a **man** with bagpipes came out on the road ahead of them, and he went along before them playing the pipes" (O'Sullivan 1977, 45).

(2.2-2) "So out he went, and he hadn't walked far when he saw **the finest man** he had ever seen coming towards him" (O'Sullivan 1977, 73).

(2.2-3) "The next thing I saw was **four men** coming on after me, with a coffin on their shoulders, [...]" (Danaher 65-66).

(2.2-4) "When he looked down the sea was rising up towards him and on it the prettiest little boat he had ever seen. There was a **little old red-haired man** sitting in the stern of the boat" (ÓhEochaidh 287).

As the four examples above show, fairies are referred to as "a man" or "the finest man" at first, and later they are found to be fairies. The terms 'boy' and 'rider' are also used to indicate male fairies:

(2.2-4) "As they came near the town they met a **small red-haired boy**, and they greeted him with a blessing on the time of days as they would greet anyone else" (ÓhEochaidh 157).

(2.2-5) "**The rider** of the white horse was standing at the door waiting for Séimín who mounted behind him, and the horse never stopped until he was left at the door of his own house" (ÓhEochaidh 170).

In the example above (2.2-5), "the rider" is a male fairy riding a horse, but is never referred to as "the man." This description of the male fairy

illustrates a very vague impression of the male fairy. Many other descriptive terms including "fellow" and "gentleman" are used to describe male fairies as mentioned below.

(2.2-6) "After she has been sitting that way for a good while a **swift-moving fellow** came up the road, stood directly opposite her, and off with him quickly down the road again" (ÓhEochaidh 149).

(2.2-7) "Later on that night, a **gentleman** came to the house, riding on a horse" (O'Sullivan 1966,169).

(2.2-8) "Oh, he had reached the age of reason — he was nine or ten years of age, **that child** — he wasn't really a child" (Henry 8).

The terms used for male fairies as mentioned above are listed in table 4 below.

Table 4. Terms for male fairies

Terms	Frequency
man/men	75 (63.0%)
Boy	11 (9.2%)
rider/horseman	9 (7.6%)
Fellow	4 (3.4%)
Lad	4 (3.4%)
Gentleman	3 (2.5%)
Piper	3 (2.5%)
male child/a child	3 (2.5%)
Son	3 (2.5%)
King	2 (1.7%)
the person	1 (0.8%)
Father	1 (0.8%)
Total	119 (100.0%)

As the table shows, the term "man/men" is the most commonly used term, appearing in seventy-five cases, amounting to sixty-three percent of all the male fairies. This percentage is not so different from the term "woman" with female fairies. The second most frequent term "boy," however, is found in only eleven cases (9.2%), which is considerably lower than the percentage of the girls in female cases (18.8%). Instead, the term "rider/horseman" often appears (9 cases, 7.6%), illustrating that male fairies often ride a horse. The examinations of the accompanied features of the fairies' appearances will reveal more about whether they often

appear with or without horses, but this viewpoint will be discussed at another opportunity.

As the following examples indicate, male fairies are initially called "the man" or "a boy," then after a sequence of events, they are often called by names such as "the wee folk."

(2.2-9) "Off they went, and they had not gone far before they met a **small red-haired man** with a fine grey hornless cow. [. . .] **The small red-haired man** said good-bye and turned the corner, and that was the last Paddy saw of him. Paddy drove the hornless cow home but even if he did the thought was in his mind that **the red-haired man** was one of **the hill-folk** [. . .]" (ÓhEochaidh 265-67).

In the example above, which is common paraphrasing, the being called "a small red-haired man" is later discovered to be "one of the hill-folk."

(2.2-10) "**The leprechauns** had come the night they had left her out and had carried the girl off. [. . .] One of them was a young lad who looked into a room and saw **three lads** playing cards" (ÓhEochaidh 49).

In the next example, (2.2-10), the fairies called "the leprechauns" for their first appearance are referred to as "three lads" when they later reappear.

The names examined in the previous examples are listed as follows. Names using the word 'fairy' or 'fairy/fairies' itself are found in fourteen cases, which is the equivalent to twenty-three percent of all the sixty-one names, which is lower percentage than that of female fairies (46.9%). It may depend on whether they are in the male form or in the female form for people to refer to them as "fairy/fairies" directly or other names such as "the wee folk."

Other names commonly used are 'wee' beings (9), 'good' (7), 'airy' (6), 'immortal' (2), as well as names indicating their 'hill' (16) habitat. The names using the word 'wee' are found in nine cases. The name "the wee folk" is found in five cases for the female fairies, illustrating a small or 'little' being. Therefore, it can be said that people's image of fairies being little may influence on the use of such names and terms used.

The most frequent name used for the male fairies is "the hill-folk" (15), appearing more often than the direct "fairy/fairies" (14). Accordingly, "the hill-folk" may be the most general name for male fairies. The name "hill-folk" probably means the people living on a hill, but there are no other places mentioned such as the sea, though the female fairies have such names relating to sea-habitats (3). This may indicate that the male fairies often live on a hill, and the female fairies live in the sea, but the

Table 5. Names of male fairies

Names	Freq.-1	Freq.-2
'fairy'		
"the fairy/fairies"	6	
"the fairy host"	3	14 (23.0%)
"the fairy man/ fairy-men"	4	
"the Duine Sighe (fairy people)"	1	
'wee'		
"the/these wee folk"	4	
"the wee airy ones"	3	9 (14.8%)
"the wee gentry"	2	
'good'		
"The Good People"	3	7 (11.5%)
"the gentry/the wee gentry"	4	
'airy'		
"the airy host"	3	6 (9.8%)
"the wee airy ones"	3	
'immortal'		
"the immortal host"	2	2 (3.3%)
'hill-'		
"the hill-folk"	15	16 (26.2%)
"the king of the country under the ground"	1	
"the leipreachan/leprechauns"	4	4 (6.6%)
"the Pooka"	1	1 (1.6%)
"the Lurikeen"	1	1 (1.6%)
"gruagach"	1	1 (1.6%)
Total	61	61 (100.0%)

relationships between the gender of fairies and their habitats will be examined at a later opportunity.

The male fairies also include unique names for a certain type of fairy, including "the leipreachan/leprechauns" (4), "the Pooka" (1), and "Lurikeen" (1). The "leipreachan/leprechaun" is famous for being a fairy shoemaker.⁸ It is also said that a "leipreachan" knows where gold is hidden, so if people find him, they catch him to try and reveal the gold's location:

(2.2-12) " 'Well, now,' said **the leprechaun**, 'do you see that big ragweed over there,' says he, 'the one that's taller than all the rest? Go over and dig it up and you'll find the gold under it.' [. . .] The man who had been on the shore released him and immediately he left his hand like a puff of wind" (Henry 37).

In previous research papers, the "leipreachan/leprechaun" is often regarded

as a solitary being but there is one case in which three leprechauns appear together. The "Pooka," another unique name used to describe male fairies, often takes the form of a horse.⁹ There are two cases of a Pooka taking the form of a horse, but the following example does not describe a Pooka as being a horse figure:

- (2.2-13) "There was a quarry-hole beside the road, and as he was going past it, **someone** inside the hole called to him. [. . .] **The person** in the hole spoke to him, and asked him to come in and join him for a while" (Ó Duilearga 268).

This "person in the hole" is later called "the Pooka." "Lurikeen," another descriptive fairy term, is not as famous, or widely used, as the previous two fairies. According to Ó hÓgáin, "Lurikeen" is a different version of a "leprechaun" which is used in the Conacht and Munster regions.¹⁰ These unique names, as with some types of fairies, are not found amongst the female fairies.

2.3. Child fairies

There are seven cases in which the information concerning the gender of fairies is unknown, and the only information given is that they take the figure of a child:

- (2.3-1) "He had a servant-boy and one day the boy was out looking for a sheep up above the house and as he went past a fairy cliff he heard **a child** crying inside it [. . .]. No one knew where the brindled cow had gone but, of course, it was **the hill-folk** who had taken it [. . .]" (ÓhEochaidh 49).

In example (2.3-1), the fairy is referred to as "a child" at first, but is later called "the hill-folk." The terms used for child fairies are usually either "child/children" (6) or "infant" (1):

Table 6. Terms for fairy children

Terms	Frequency
child/children	6 (85.7%)
infant	1 (14.3%)
Total	7 (100.0%)

In these seven cases, they are also referred to by other names such as "the hill-folk" (2) and "the gentry" (1):

Child fairies often appear with adult fairies, or the child appears first and the adults later. As the example (2.3-1) shows, the child fairy and adult

fairies are called "the hill-folk" collectively. The number of names for child fairies is so few that hardly any impression of 'fairy' is found in them.

Table 7. Names of fairy children

Names	Frequency
"the gentry"	1 (33.3%)
'hill-' "the hill-folk"	2 (66.7%)
Total	3 (100.0%)

2.4. Folk, people, and others

The trooping fairies such as folk, people, and others have names as shown in the next three examples:

(2.4-1) "He loosed one of the stones at it whereupon the crag opened and the dog went into it. He followed the dog inside and threw the other stone at it and where did he find himself but in a large court! There was a big crowd of **people** in it who were dancing, drinking and singing" (ÓhEochaidh 77).

In example (2.4-1), the fairies are called "people" and no other name is used for them, but it is possible to say that they are fairies because of the situation, in which the entrance of the crag opens and a crowd of them is present in the court inside.

(2.4-2) "Those who are making noise are not **people of this world** but **the wee folk of the sea** [. . .]" (ÓhEochaidh 193).

The above extract (2.4-2) shows that fairies are called both "people" and "the wee folk." As the two examples above indicate, if the fairies are called "people," we understand that they are a group of fairies.

On the contrary, there are twenty-one cases in which the fairies are called by names such as "the fairy host," but they are never referred to as "people" (refer to example 2.4-3).

(2.4-3) "One night as he was going through Fintra on his way to Killybegs Fair which was to be held next day, who should he meet but **the fairy host**" (ÓhEochaidh 53).

For these fairies, it is not mentioned if they take the form of "people," but judging from the term "host" or "folk" included in their description, they seem to be in the form of a group of people.

Thus, the trooping fairies are called "people" in thirteen cases, and no other term is used. Fairies using the descriptive terms "host" or "folk"

Table 8. Terms for trooping fairies

Terms	Frequency
people	13 (38.2%)
('host' 'folk' in their names)	21 (61.8%)
Total	34 (100.0%)

in their name (for example, "the fairy host," "the wee folk") are found in twenty-one cases.

The names used for groups of fairies are listed in table 9 below:

Table 9. Names of trooping fairies

Names	Freq.-1	Freq.-2
'fairy' "the fairy host" "the fairies" "the Duine Sighe (fairy people)"	5 5 1	11 (35.5%)
'immortal' "the immortal host"	5	5 (16.1%)
'wee' "the wee folk/ the good wee folk"	5	5 (16.1%)
'airy' "the airy host/ the Airy Host"	3	3 (9.7%)
'good' "the Good People"	2	2 (6.5%)
'middle' "a middle host"	1	1 (3.2%)
'hill-' "the hill-folk"	4	4 (12.9%)
Total	31	31 (100.0%)

The direct name "fairies" and similar ones are found in eleven cases compiling 35.5% of all thirty-one names, which is lower than that of the female fairies (46.9%), and higher than that of the male fairies (23.0%).

With groups of fairies, five cases of "the immortal host" are observable. For these "immortal hosts," three of them try to abduct humans, one is dancing in a field, and the last warns humans not to interfere with their lives. Although they are "the immortal host," they appear to be very human-like. The adjective "immortal" may be associated with human death, and be used when people are kidnapped by fairies or when they

badly offend fairies, sometimes resulting in death.

3. Terms or names used for animal figures of fairies

Animals relating to fairies can be divided into two categories. Firstly, they themselves are apparently fairies in animal form, and secondly, they are domestic animals belonging to fairies. The animals of the former category are fairies in animal form, but sometimes it is difficult to distinguish them. Animals which fairies take the form of are listed in the table 10 below:

Table 10. Animal figures

	Frequency
Horse	6
Seal	5
Dog/hound	5
Hare/rabbit	5
Bird	4
Cow	4
Frog	2
Sheep	2
Fish	1
Cat	1
Bull	1
Heifer	1
Weasel	1
Wolf	1
Griffin ¹¹	1
Mermaid ¹²	1
Total	41

The figure of a horse appears most frequently (6), but the form of a seal (5), dog/hound (5), hare/rabbit (5), and bird (5) are also frequently found. As illustrated in the above table there are many different kinds of animals that are used to describe fairies. The table below (table 11) examines the names of animal fairies that are used in various texts.

Names using the word "fairy" are found in two cases, with the descriptive term of "water," used only once, which provides an insight into their habitation. The term "Pooka" appears twice, and is a fairy disguised a horse.¹³ This fairy can change its figure, often into the form of a horse, but

Table 11. Names of fairies in animal form

Names	Frequency
'fairy' "fairy rabbit" "fairy salmon"	2
'water-' "water-horses"	1
the Pooka	2
Total	5

one case of the human form also exists, as previously mentioned. Thus, there are few names used for animal fairies, with only five names found among all forty-one animal fairies, with most of them being direct names and describing ones habitat. Accordingly, it can be said that animal fairies are hardly ever given special fairy names.

4. Terms or names used for other figures of fairies

The other figures of fairies include: voice, noise, and music (aural manifestation); sea, wind, and light (natural phenomena); vehicles controlled by fairies; and the traces of their actions. People apply fairy names to such phenomena and their traces, so that the images of people towards fairies may be identifiable by such names. The phenomena and traces of actions which are thought to be caused by fairies are listed below in Table 12:

In the thirteen cases of aural manifestation, voice, noise, or music is heard but no visible figures of fairies can be seen.

- (4-1) "It is not right for a fisherman to rise to the first call in the morning for fear it may be **the sea-gentry who are calling him**" (ÓEochaidh 201).

The fairies which appear in such forms may not have any visible figure, or may hide themselves, but people still regard them as fairies.

Fairies in the form of natural phenomena are found in nine cases. The following example, (4-2), shows fairies appearing as wind:

- (4-2) "And he was just at the yard gate when this **mighty blast of a *sidhe gaoithe* [fairy wind]** nearly knocked him down. And it took the *sopog* [bundle of straw] out of his hand, and it all in a flame and threw it up on the roof of the house, and with the dint of the wind the whole of the thatch was one blaze of fire before two minutes, [...]" (Danaher 52).

Table 12. Other figures

	Freq.-1	Freq.-2
Aural manifestation		
Voice	6	13
Noise	2	
Voice and Noise	2	
Music	3	
Natural phenomena		
Sea/wave	5	9
Wind	3	
Light	1	
Vehicles controlled by fairies	4	5
Boat	1	
Lorry		
Traces of action	17	17
Total	44	44

In this example, the wind deprives a man of his torch and burns a thatch with it. The visual imagery of this text is such that the wind is not controlled by fairies but the wind itself is the fairies. The same thing can be said for other natural phenomena.

Cases of fairy boats (4) and a fairy lorries (1) are also evident, and they seem to be controlled by fairies, but their figures do not appear:

(4-3) "In the old days it often happened that herring-fishers saw **ghost-boats** before a drowning or a storm. It was the tradition that these apparitions often saved crews from being lost" (ÓhEochaidh 211).

Finally, seventeen cases are found of traces of the actions of fairies. In these cases, the fairies do not appear, but they set a trap to take people away, leave gifts to people, or make domestic animals crazy or even die. These happenings are considered to be done by fairies:

(4-4) "They searched here and there and at last they came on a **gridiron where the fish was roasting and there was no fire at all under it.** [. . .] "If they had tasted the herrings which were being roasted," said the priest, "you would never have seen them again. **The hill-folk** had put the fish there to beguile them, and if they had tasted it they would have forgotten all about home and they would never have been seen again" (ÓhEochaidh 43).

In example (4-4), the fairies lay a trap, the good smell of roasting fish, for two girls to be led by and taken into the fairies' world. No fairies

appeared, but those who leave traces of fairies' actions such as traps, are often referred to as "the hill-folk."

The names for such aural manifestations, phenomena, and the traces of actions are listed below in Table 13:

Table 13. Names of the fairies in the other figures

Names	Freq.-1	Freq.-2
'wee' "the wee folk" "the wee gentry"	10 2	12 (40.0%)
'fairy' "the fairies" "the fairy host" "Fairy whirlwind/ <i>sidhe gaoithe</i> (fairy wind)"	4 3 2	9 (30.0%)
'good' "the <i>siofarai</i> (the Good People)" "the noble people"	1 1	2 (6.7%)
'airy, ghost' "ghost boat"	1	1 (3.3%)
'hill-' "the hill-folk" 'sea' "the sea gentry"	3 1	4 (13.3%)
"the Headless Coach"	1	1 (3.3%)
"Tonn Tóime/the wave of Tóime"	1	1 (3.3%)
Total	30	30 (100.0%)

As indicated in the table, invisible fairies are most frequently called by names including the adjective 'wee' (12 cases). Accordingly, it can be concluded that people tend to regard them as small beings even if they do not see them.

Names directly calling them "fairies" are found in nine cases, and names including the word 'good' (2), 'ghost' (1), as well as names indicating their habitation (4), are also found as names of human figures.

Conclusion

This paper examined the terms used for fairies, concluding that the form of fairies can be divided into three main categories: human figures (261 cases, 75.4%), animal figures (41 cases, 11.9%), and other figures (44 cases, 12.7%). The human figures were further classified into four types:

female figures (101), male figures (119), child figures (7), and group figures (34). All the names of the human-figure fairies and their frequencies examined in each section, are enumerated in Table 14 below: Names directly using 'fairy/fairies' are the most commonly used, found

Table 14. Names of the fairies

Names	Female		Male		Child		Group		Total	
'fairy' (the fairies/fairy) (the fairy woman/man) (the fairy host) (the <i>Duine Sighe</i> [fairy people])	(8) (9) (5) (1)	23	(6) (4) (3) (1)	14	–		(5) (–) (5) (1)	11	(19) (13) (13) (3)	48 (33.3%)
'wee' (the/these wee folk) (the wee airy ones) (the wee gentry)	(3) (2) (–)	5	(4) (3) (2)	9	–		(5) (–) (–)	5	(12) (5) (2)	19 (13.2%)
'airy' (the airy host) (the wee airy ones) (the spirit) (a ghost)	(2) (2) (2) (1)	7	(3) (3)	6	–		(3) (–)	3	(8) (5) (2) (1)	16 (11.1%)
'good' (The Good People) (the gentry /the wee gentry)	(2) (2)	4	(3) (4)	7	– (1)	1	(2) –	2	(7) (7)	14 (9.7%)
'immortal' (the immortal host)	1		2		–		5		8 (5.6%)	
'middle' (a middle host)	–		–		–		1		1 (0.7%)	
'hill-' (the hill-folk) (the king of the country under the ground)	(6) –	6	(15) (1)	16	(2) –	2	(4) –	4	(27) (1)	28 (19.4%)
'sea-' (the sea-host) (the mermaid) (three daughters of theKing of the Sea)	(1) (1) (1)	3	–		–		–		(1) (1) (1)	3 (2.1%)
- the leipreachan/leprechauns	–		4		–		–		4 (2.8%)	
- the Pooka	–		1		–		–		1 (0.7%)	
- the Lurikeen	–		1		–		–		1 (0.7%)	
- gruagach	–		1		–		–		1 (0.7%)	
Total	49		61		3		31		144 (100.0%)	

in forty-eight cases amounting to 33.3%. Other names, which seem to be influenced by peoples preconceived ideas of fairies including the adjective 'wee' (19 cases, 13.2%), 'airy' or a similar meaning (16 cases, 11.1%), 'good' or similar terms (14 cases, 9.7%), and 'immortal' (8 cases, 5.6%) are also found. Names indicating fairies' habitats are found in thirty-one cases in total, including 'hill' (28) and 'sea' (3).

As for percentages for the direct use of the term "fairy/fairies," this amounts to 46.9% (23/49 cases) for female figures, 23.0% (14/61 cases) for male figures, and 35.5% (11/31 cases) for groups. If the assertion by Narváez et al. is true, in that people do not call them "fairies" but euphemistic names for fear of offending them, then male fairies are more feared by people than female fairies. This is because male fairies are directly called "fairies" less frequently, and in fewer cases than female. However, it would be dangerous to make a hasty conclusion concerning the question. We need to investigate how people think about fairies from the other viewpoints such as the good/evil properties of their actions.

The next question is whether "euphemistic" names such as 'wee' 'good' and 'airy' beings are actually influenced by people's preconceived image of fairies or not. These answers will be clarified throughout an examination of fairies' appearance and their actions. In any case, it is possible to conclude that the names used for human forms of fairies have four qualities: 'wee,' 'good,' 'airy,' and 'immortal.'

Similar names of human figures including 'wee,' 'good,' or habitats, are also used for invisible fairies such as aural manifestations and natural phenomena, and to describe the fairies' traces of actions. In other words, people use these terms regardless of whether they are visible or invisible. Consequently, it may be speculated that fairies are considered to change their figures between visible and invisible, or to change themselves into being a part of the natural world.

Notes

- 1 "They[sídh, modern spelling: sí, fairies] are also known as aos sí ('fairy folk'), slua sí ('fairy host'), daoine maithe ('good people'), so called for fear of offending them, hence the Hiberno-English 'gentry', also used for them), and bunadh na genoc ('hill people')." (Welch 523)
- 2 "Most often the Irish fairies are called the good people or the gentry. [. . .] In Ireland the title 'the good people' serves the same function, because the fairies, quick to be offended, must be placated or they might, in a moment of anger, devastate the crops or cause mortal children to sicken or die. What is good for a fairy may be fatal for a mortal; so we hope that by flattering them, they might keep

- us favourably in mind." (White 8)
- 3 "Just as the Furies were called 'The Eumenides', the 'Kindly Ones', so were the fairies called laudatory names by the country people. As Kirk says, 'These Sith, or Fairies, they call Sleagh Maith, or the Good People, it would seem, to prevent the Dint of their ill Attempts, (for the Irish use to bless all they fear Harme of:).' " (Briggs, *An Encyclopedia of Fairies* 127)
 - 4 "There was a strong folk assumption that one should never refer to the fairies by their name (whether *sí*, or the diminutive and somewhat disparaging *sióga*, or the English word 'fairies'), and so several circumlocutions were used — for example, *na daoine maíthe* (the good people), or *na daoine uaisle* (the noble people)." (Ó hÓgáin, *The Lore of Ireland* 207)
 - 5 In this paper, *Folktales of Ireland* is indicated with "O'Sullivan 1966," and *The Folklore of Ireland* is indicated with "O'Sullivan 1974." *Legends from Ireland* is also indicated with "O'Sullivan 1977."
 - 6 According to OED, 'mermaid' is a half-woman and half-fish: "an imaginary species of beings, more or less human in character, supposed to inhabit the sea, and to have the head and trunk of a woman, the lower limbs being replaced by the tail of a fish or cetacean." Briggs also takes the same position as OED: "the mermaids are like beautiful maidens from the waist upwards, but they have the tail of a fish" (*An Encyclopedia of Fairies* 287). On the other hand, Ó hÓgáin states that 'mermaid' is borrowed from Latin and other sources, then it is naturalized in Irish tradition, and functions as fairies of the sea, lake, and river (*The Lore of Ireland* 342). In one case, a "mermaid" is also referred to as "young woman," and she marries a man in this tale. Therefore, it is appropriate to think that the mermaids which are regarded as the fairies of sea, lake, and river in Ireland, as Ó hÓgáin says, are in the figure of woman, not a half-fish.
 - 7 According to Máire MacNeill, the translator of *Fairy Legends from Donegal*, she uses the word 'wee' instead of 'little' because the former is generally used in Donegal (26).
 - 8 Briggs, *An Encyclopedia of Fairies* 264.
 - 9 Ó hÓgáin, *Lore of Ireland* 269.
 - 10 Ibid., 308.
 - 11 This "griffin" has a human head and the body of hen, so is classified differently from the bird.
 - 12 This "mermaid" is not described in detail, so it is better to classify it as a half-fish being.
 - 13 E.g., O'Sullivan notes in his *Legends from Ireland* as follows: "The púca (pooka, supernatural animal like a horse) is featured in many legends which describe how a man was taken on an eerie ride by the animal at night and was left at his home, exhausted, next morning" (71).

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